

As doctors, we are dedicated to ensuring the safety of patients, and as dermatologists, skin safety and sun protection become paramount. But what do we do when our patients elect to go to a tanning salon each day?

**The facts:** Tanning salons have been around since the 1970s. In 1988, only 1% of Americans reported using indoor tanning facilities. However, by 2007, this number had risen to 27%. This increased popularity of indoor tanning has directly coincided with a sharp rise in skin cancer rates. Numerous research studies have proven that indoor tanning causes skin cancer including melanoma. Indoor tanning is a potent source of UV radiation, especially UVA. The UVA radiation emitted by tanning beds is as much as 10-15 times more powerful than midday sunlight. This radiation makes the tanning beds much more dangerous than natural sunlight. The World Health Organization (WHO) and National Toxicology Program have classified tanning beds as a “known human carcinogen.” The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) states that melanoma risk is “increased by 75% when use of tanning devices starts before 30yrs of age.”

The concern is that more and more young people are using tanning facilities each year without full knowledge of the risks associated with this behavior. Melanoma is now the most common form of cancer in the 15-29 year old age group, and unfortunately, its growth rate has increased by 50% since the 1980s. One study reported that 76% of the melanomas in this age group were attributable to tanning bed use.

Despite our current knowledge, the use of tanning beds amongst fair skinned youth, the most vulnerable population, is still on the rise. So, why is this? In order to investigate this issue further, several ranking members of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on health investigated the accuracy of the information provided to teenage girls who are interested in tanning services. The investigators called 300 tanning salons nationwide and asked a series of questions including risks/benefits of tanning as well as the salon policies on such. The results were alarming:

- 90% of the salons stated that tanning presented no health risks.
- Four out of five salons falsely claimed that indoor tanning is beneficial to a young person's health.
- Salons downplayed the health risks of indoor tanning stating that “it's got to be safe, or else the government wouldn't let us do it”
- Tanning salons target teenage girls in their advertisements: student discounts, prom/homecoming/back to school specials. They allow frequent, even daily tanning with “unlimited tanning” options when you sign up at the gym.

In short, there are no health benefits to indoor tanning that outweigh the risks associated with the practice. There is no such thing as a safe or moderate tan. ANY degree of tanning can lead to DNA damage and consequently, poses a serious health risk. California was the first state to ban indoor tanning for children. The law took effect on January 1, 2012. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a ban on the use of tanning devices by individuals under the age of 18. Passing a law like this is crucial in order to safeguard children and adolescents from the dangers of unsafe UV radiation exposure and allow them to live the life they are entitled to.

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